

New Governance: Pitfalls of Activation Policies for Young Migrant Dropouts in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Migrant youth are at a disadvantage in the Netherlands when it comes to schooling and work: many drop out of school and are unemployed. We will use concepts of new governance to discuss the complexities surrounding the execution of policies to reintegrate dropouts back into school or the labour market from the perspectives of professionals (street level bureaucrats) working in activation programmes. The results show that cooperation is difficult. The most difficult youngsters are beyond the reach of most policy initiatives. Furthermore, many professionals perceive educational requirements as unrealistic for some youngsters. Finally, new requirements for employability may stigmatize youngsters as unwilling and unmotivated.

Keywords: Young Migrants, Youth Unemployment, Early School Leaving, Activation Policies, New Governance

Introduction

Current figures on the position of young migrants³ in the Netherlands indicate that migrant youth are at a disadvantage in the educational and professional spheres compared with their Dutch counterparts. They are overrepresented in the lower segments of education and leave school before graduation almost twice as often (Ministry of Education [Min. OCW], 2007a). On the labour market they are concentrated in the lower segments and show structurally high levels of unemployment (Statistics Netherlands [CBS], 2008). Of special concern are what are referred to as non-participants i.e. young people who do not attend school, who are not active jobseekers, and who are without a regular income (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment [Min. SZW], 2007a).

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³ In the Netherlands the term non-western migrant includes migrants from Turkey, Africa, Latin America and Asia, with the exception of Indonesia and Japan, with at least one parent born in one of these countries. The young migrants referred to in this paper are non-western, mostly Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese or Antillean. Those groups represent the four largest migrant groups in the Netherlands. Furthermore, among them dropout rates and unemployment figures are the highest.

Many social policies and measures to improve the position of young migrants in the Netherlands have been developed in order to help them cope with their disadvantaged position. These measures mainly originated from two policy lines. Firstly, there is a more activating approach towards unemployment which resulted in the Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) (Eichhorst, Kaufmann & Konle-Seidl, 2008). This pertains to recent transitions from a 'passive' to an 'active' welfare state in which activation to work has increasingly taken precedence over social security provision (Van Oorschot, 2004) and in which social security functions as a reintegration tool, an incentive to stimulate the 'inactive' unemployed or benefit recipients to work (Van Berkel & Borghi, 2008). The goal of these policies is to improve economic self-reliance and to reach social integration of these groups since their status is often associated with poverty and social exclusion (Eichhorst et al., 2008).

Secondly, a number of policies that aim to combat school dropout rates fit in with the ALMP context and have an activating character. In line with the European aspiration to become a knowledge economy (European Council, 2000), the aim is to prevent youngsters from leaving school early, to educate young people as much as possible so in the future they will have more opportunities on the labour market, and to reintegrate dropouts back into school and onto the labour market.

Policies on early school leaving and youth unemployment are developed and coordinated on national and European levels, but policy implementation and activation programmes are decentralized. Municipalities, employment offices (in the Netherlands, Centre for Work and Income [CWI]) and schools are all responsible for achieving the national and European goals. This study examines the execution of policies to reduce school dropout levels and to activate young migrants to work in the local context of the city of Utrecht. We are interested in how official policies take shape in the institutions and organisations responsible for policy execution. We are also interested in what this implies for the young migrant dropouts involved. The central questions of our study are: how are policies concerning early school leaving and youth unemployment executed in the local context (the city of Utrecht) and what are the consequences for the migrant youngsters involved?

To answer our research questions our study consists of three different parts. The first part treats the theoretical field of policy execution focussing on new governance and street level bureaucracy. We also offer an overview of the main European national and local policies to combat early school leaving and youth unemployment. Together this serves as the (theoretical and policy) background for the second and third part. In the second part we examine how official policy takes shape in the local context along the lines of activation and new governance. Therefore we performed an extensive case study research in the regional context of the city of Utrecht. Utrecht is one of the four largest cities in the Netherlands where the dropout and youth unemployment rates are the highest (Min. OCW, 2007a; CBS, 2008). The third part deals with the consequences of the policy execution for the young migrant dropouts and we examine in what ways policies work out beneficially or obstructively.

New governance and street level bureaucracy in activation

Central in the implementation and execution of activation policies are forms of new governance (Van Berkel & Borghi, 2008; Van Berkel, 2009; Lindsay & McQuaid, 2009). New governance entails that, in order to address complex social problems, such as disadvantaged youngsters with multiple problems, new models for provision of activation must be employed: welfare provision is less organised on a state level and instead responsibilities for providing services are decentralized to locally responsive multi-agency partnerships which consist of multiple stakeholders with specific expertise (Daly, 2003; Van Berkel & Borghi, 2008; Lindsay & McQuaid, 2009).

In his studies Van Berkel (2005, 2008) distinguishes key concepts typical of new governance in implementing activation policies. First, *decentralisation*: In active welfare states local governments are more and more responsible for the implementation of national policies and the provision of social services. Secondly, *marketisation*: with the transition from passive to active welfare states, (semi) privatized reintegration markets were created in order to make activation services more efficient and of better quality (Struyven & Steurs, 2002; Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2005; Lindsay & McQuaid, 2009). This means providing welfare services is (partly) contracted out to private re-integration or activation companies (providers) by governmental institutions like employment offices, which act as purchasers of these services. This competitive climate should stimulate private companies to promote more individually focussed and responsive service provision. Lastly, the promotion of *interagency cooperation*: on the local level one-stop shops have been introduced with the aim to have a more effective cooperation between organisations responsible for income provision and activation and to serve tailor made services for the unemployed. These partnerships are established between former providers of these services, but also with new (contracted out) commercial partners.

Several studies highlight some difficulties or tensions in delivering services by means of new governance. Firstly, regarding interagency cooperation: differences between (local) partners in professional and organisational values, cultures and interests can hamper successful interagency cooperation and integration of services in one-stop shops (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006; Glendinning, 2003; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Power differences and struggles between partner organisations over who's in charge of the partnership, fear of losing one organisational territory and interest can obstruct trust-building between partners (Glendinning, 2003). Contracting out activation services can hinder 'genuine partnership' because it entails unequal power relationships between purchaser and provider. This can limit the exchange of shared knowledge and experience which are vital for partnerships (Lindsay & McQuaid, 2008).

Furthermore, instead of delivering individualized tailor made services contracting out seems to lead to private activation services applying standardized approaches (Lindsay & McQuaid, 2009). Van Berkel & Van der Aa (2005) point to several disincentives for private companies to offer more tailor made services: for instance they only have to meet a success rate (job placements) of around 50 percent, and there is a lack of quality control and monitoring by the purchasers of the services offered to the clients. Lastly, the way in which private activation services are financed, by outflow in job placements, can lead to 'creaming' in which difficult clients are excluded from programs or 'parking' in long term trajectories in which hardly any job counselling or job training takes place (Struyven & Steurs, 2002; Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2005).

To examine our second question whether the social policies have unintended consequences for the target group, young migrant dropouts, we will examine how the supply of social services for young migrant dropouts is affected by the principles of new governance: marketisation and interagency cooperation. However, the delivery of social services is not only determined by formal and operational organisation, but also by the way professionals adopt these policies and put them in practice. Therefore we also use street-level bureaucracy theory which states that the street-level workers in organisations ultimately decide what kind of services and benefits clients receive. Consequently, according to Lipsky, they do not just deliver but in fact make policy (Lipsky, 1980; Evans & Harris, 2004; Winter, 2002, 2003). The street-level bureaucracy theory consists of two key concepts: discretion and coping behaviour. Discretion is the freedom professionals or street-level bureaucrats have when deciding what action to take. They use their discretion to apply various coping behaviours which are the informal practice strategies professionals apply to handle complex work situations and work pressure, such as an enormous workload and limited resources. One important coping strategy is 'creaming' where professionals tend to focus on 'workable' clients at the expense of the more difficult ones. In this present study we explore whether discretion and coping behaviours on the part of professionals in reintegration organisations in Utrecht have positive or questionable consequences for young migrant dropouts.

In the next section we provide an overview of the Dutch national and local activation policies on early school leaving and youth unemployment. For this we use existing data such as official policy documents and other studies that evaluate activation and reintegration policies.

Dutch policies

We now give a brief overview of the main national and local policies to reduce the number of dropouts and to promote labour market participation of young migrant people. We focus on the main policies that pertain to young migrant dropouts. Migrants are often seen as a group that needs extra attention in order to improve their educational level or to encourage their labour market participation (Social and Economic Council [SER], 2007). However, the problems of migrant youth are dealt with in the more general framework of achieving a sufficient educational level and consequently improving labour market participation. Nevertheless, since migrant youngsters are well represented in dropout and youth unemployment rates, these policies implicitly target this group. This can also be observed in the reintegration programmes which are generally to be found in migrant neighbourhoods and where clients with a migrant background are overrepresented.

National context

Policies on early school leaving stem from the early 1990s, with reforms in vocational education. In 1994, the basic qualification was introduced as a way of establishing a minimum level of vocational training which would ensure labour market access (Houtkoop, 2004). Obtaining the basic qualification entails completing at least the second level of secondary vocational education. Without a basic qualification, sustainable labour market options are assumed to be limited and the definition of 'dropouts' in the Netherlands therefore actually refers to all youngsters who do not obtain this basic qualification. Furthermore, since 1994, the Netherlands has been divided into Regional Report and Coordination Points (RMC regions) to facilitate tackling the problem of school dropouts and to register the number of early school leavers.

The recent boom in Dutch policies to prevent young people from dropping out and to return dropouts to school is heavily influenced by the Lisbon Agreements. The European Council set the goal to become one of the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economies and therefore one important aim is to reduce the number of people in the 18-24 age group who have only completed the lower level of secondary education by half (European Council, 2000). In this intensified attack on reducing dropout, a new law was introduced in 2001 that required municipalities and schools to report the number of dropouts to the RMCs.

In 2006 the Dutch government launched an action plan entitled 'Attack on Dropping Out' because the number of dropouts remained high and it was feared that the Lisbon targets were out of reach (Min. OCW, 2006). This plan entailed, for instance, to create more trainee places and one-stop shops for young people with questions relating to education and employment. Another important measure was to extend the compulsory school leaving age from 17 to 18 and introduce a 'qualification obligation' (Min. OCW, 2007b). This means that all youngsters between 16 and 18 who have not attained a basic qualification level should attend school until they turn 18.

The policies give priority to education rather than to employment. The goal for young unemployed people is for them to achieve the basic qualification through additional education or to award them qualifications for skills obtained through work experience (Min. OCW, 2003, 2006).

The primary responsibility for executing labour market policies lies with the municipalities and their social-service departments. As of 2004, responsibility for providing social benefit is tied by the new Social Assistance Act (WWB) (Min. SZW, 2003), which provides municipalities with

their own budget to implement social assistance policies at local level. The aim is to limit the inflow of people into social security and to stimulate the outflow into work. The municipalities and the Social Security Agency contract out private reintegration companies that are responsible for providing reintegration programmes for benefit recipients.

The aims to improve both the qualification level and the labour market position of young people converge in 2009 introduced study-work obligation to the age of 27. All youngsters applying for social benefit are referred to work programmes or sent back to school, or to a combination of work and study. If young people refuse this offer to learn or work they may no longer be entitled to benefit (Min. SZW, 2007b).

Local context: prevention and activation in Utrecht

In Utrecht, there is integrated cooperation, i.e. a 'comprehensive approach', between different organisations - schools, youth care, social work, the municipality and employment offices and also private initiatives which run different kinds of preventive and curative programmes are all involved in the field of activating young dropouts (see model 1). The municipality also created a covenant scheme together with the Ministry of Education and the local training centres for secondary vocational education (ROCs) to reduce the number of dropouts. Also, Utrecht implemented the obligation to work and study up to the age of 27. The municipality opened a youth office in January 2009, this is a front office where young Utrecht residents between 13 and 27 years of age can go with their questions on school, work and income. The youth office refers dropouts to the most suitable institutions that will help them return to school or find employment on the labour market.

This overview of current policies is the background against which we studied the local execution of measures to combat dropping out and to enhance reintegration. To further answer our research questions 'how are the policies executed and what does this imply for the young migrants' we concentrate on matters related to new governance in activation and the role of front line workers or the street level bureaucrats. First, interagency cooperation and marketisation are treated: how does cooperation between organisations work and how do organisations approach and admit young people. Secondly, issues surrounding obtaining sufficient educational qualifications and new requirements for employability that affect young migrants are discussed. These imply important implications for the execution of official activation policies and the position of young migrant dropouts.

Methods and overview of the local field of activation

Our study was part of the comparative European research project TRESEGY. The project ran from June 2006-2009 and studied how young migrants experience their life in their country of residence, what problems they face and what kind of support from social policy they receive. Six European countries with nine cities as research locations participated in the project. The project realised extensive quantitative and qualitative studies involving youth surveys and ethnographic studies in various local settings like on the street, schools, community centres and activation programmes for young people. In this article we are discussing the findings for the Dutch context.

For the qualitative field study on policy execution, we conducted a case study and interviewed 28 professionals which are key figures in public and private organisations involved in the activation of young dropouts and the young unemployed in Utrecht (see annex).

The picture below (figure 1) provides a schematic overview of the local field of activation and its main levels and actors. We also included the different trajectories dropouts can take. Moreover, other cities in the Netherlands are similarly organised so this picture resembles the situation

of activation of early school leavers in major Dutch cities. The programmes and policies target 'dropouts': youngsters in the 13-27 age range who are at risk of dropping out of school, who have already dropped out, and who may also be unemployed.

In the city of Utrecht, there is a large migrant community. Because many migrant youngsters in Utrecht are in a disadvantaged position, the presented local activation initiatives often involve this group.

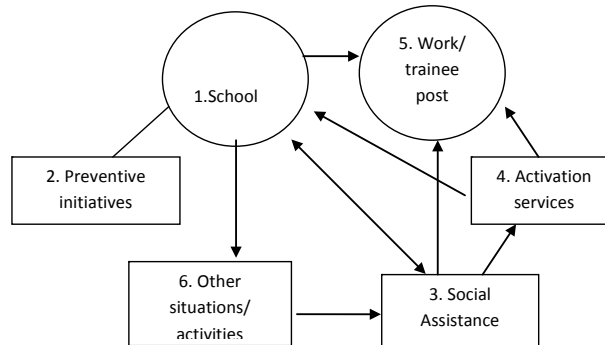


Figure 1: *Local field of activation*

The following main actors are involved in the field of activating dropouts: first schools (Regional Training Centres) which house care and advice teams and rebound facilities for youngsters who face dropping out. Secondly, in Utrecht there are several dropout prevention projects which collaborate with schools and are executed in classrooms like buddy projects, a self-employment project and a migrant empowerment association. Third, social assistance organised around municipality institutions entailing one-stop offices like the youth office, and the study-work office. Other important players on this level are the school attendance office and the Department of Education responsible for executing educational policies. Fourth are private activation and rehabilitation services. Fifth are work and trainee posts. Work and trainee posts are joined in this figure because trainee posts are considered to be necessarily stepping-stones for being employed. Finally, youngsters can be in other activities or situations like care tasks, black work, psychological or psychiatric services, juridical circuit, etc. Within this field dropouts can take the several trajectories (indicated by the arrows): for instance, dropping out and entering directly the labour market, or not finding/searching work and applying for social benefit, and from social assistance back into school, work or trainee posts (e.g. work-first projects). It should be clear that there are more possibilities and that these trajectories can be repeated in variable ways several times. For example, when youngsters lose their job or drop out of school once more, a new cycle can start again.

Between February and May 2007, and September 2008 and April 2009 we held semi-structured in depth-interviews from over an hour with 28 figures that are representatives of local organisations and projects (see Table 1 in the appendix). We selected our respondents so that they form a balanced representation of our case study (Yin, 1994). We established contacts in the field using snowball sampling; in this way we composed a sample that represents the whole reintegration field of the city of Utrecht. We started with policymakers of the municipality and the schools because they have a good overview of all the different organisations active in this area. Their information enabled us to map the local field of activation and they also provided us with several contact persons within the different organisations. Our respondents are in most cases professionals who are often programme coordinators or policymakers and also staff who actually carry out the work, in order to establish a broad local overview of the policies and their

implementation in the city of Utrecht. Moreover, all the coordinators were, in addition to their managerial tasks, actually working with the youngsters.

We complemented the interview data with participant observations of actual policy execution in the field. We conducted participant observations in a garage that has work-study programmes for young dropouts. We interviewed the training staff, the owner and several migrant youngsters and observed how educational goals were merged with practical training in a real life work situation. Furthermore, we attended a rebound class for youngsters who face dropping out and interviewed several youngsters and the coordinating teacher. The observations were written out in field reports and the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

We decided to stop to recruit new informants when we noticed we could not retrieve new information from extra interviews, which meant that we reached data saturation (Boeije, 2010). Furthermore, in this study we carried out triangulation to validate our data. We used three different types of triangulation; triangulation of researchers, data resources and methods. During the whole research process two researchers were involved in the study. The benefit of working with two or more researchers is that two persons always know more than one person, and that interpretations could always be verified with the other researcher. Triangulation of data resources was established by interviewing many different actors in the field of reintegration in the city of Utrecht. In this way we were able to examine many different perspectives on the same issues, in order to verify the statements of informants. Last, by combining methods like interviewing and observations we could compare 'speech' with 'actions' and verify answers given in face-to-face interviews with observed behaviour. This improved the validity of the study.

We analysed the data using the MAXQDA07 software package, which enabled us to perform an accurate and systematic analysis of our qualitative data. Segments from the transcripts were coded with the help of our theoretical concepts (Boeije, 2010). Core concepts were identified as overarching themes of the study and we were able to get results based on theoretical themes which were constructed with the coded fragments of our analysis.

Results

Interagency cooperation

'One problem you come across is that so many organisational cultures are working together in the office. And we try to develop unity, some kind of professional unity. If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.'

(Coordinator P7 Youth Office)

Central to the comprehensive approach is interagency cooperation in which the different and multiple social problems of youngsters are taken care of. There are different levels of cooperation. Firstly, the municipality is involved in various cooperation initiatives, or one-stop shops such as the youth office, a work-study office, and an employer's office. All aim to put the unemployed or dropouts in contact with the right institutions, or to put employers in touch with the unemployed. When talking of these kinds of initiatives, a phrase that was often heard was: 'they work like a spider in a web'. For the young dropouts the youth office is the most relevant, where partners from secondary vocational schools, social work, employment offices, employers, school attendance officers and social affairs cooperate in the office. The main objective of the cooperation is to present dropouts with a tailor-made programme in which various aspects of their particular situation are taken care of. This tailor-made or individual approach entails a considerable amount of discretion on the part of the youth office professionals, because they are the people who decide what care will be given and which organisation a youngster will be referred to.

Secondly, preventing students from leaving school early also involves collaboration between the municipality and schools. Vocational schools in Utrecht work together with the school attendance officer from the municipality and professional care institutions.

Thirdly, as a result of marketisation, the municipality contracted out the reintegration tasks to commercial organisations. The youth office, for instance, put out the reintegration services, which means that youngsters who need to be reintegrated into the labour market are referred to a private reintegration company. These organisations work together with official partners such as youth care, employment offices, the police and judicial authorities and some are also connected to the youth office. If some kind of professional care or help is not possible in one organisation, other parties are contacted and clients referred to them.

There has been a recent move to increase cooperation with professional youth care institutions. For example, schools and reintegration projects cooperate with professional care, in order to provide support for youngsters with their personal and psychological problems. Activation programmes provide social care themselves through psychologists or cooperate with different professional care organisations. Since some students drop out because they have personal problems, secondary vocational schools set up special needs advisory teams to refer pupils to social work and mental health care when necessary.

Complexities of interagency cooperation

The interviewees explained that most of the dropouts have numerous personal problems, including mental health issues, addiction, debt, or care responsibilities. This means that in many cases numerous parties are involved and this makes working together more complex. In the past it used to be possible for different organisations to work independently of each other on a youngster's various problems, for example a housing organisation and debt aid operated separately without even being aware of the other's involvement. Despite considered to be complex there is a lot of willingness to make the cooperation succeed:

'It is easy to say we work integrated, right? However, it is not easy to collaborate with all these parties, it is very complex. People who talk easily about it do not know what it means in practice. It is really something... nevertheless you should at least try to do it.'

(Policymaker 2 P6 Municipality Department of Education)

Furthermore, registration of young dropouts and their problems was difficult in the past and a newly introduced computer system to which all involved organisations and institutions are linked should now make it easier to share and collect information and provide tailor-made programmes for youngsters. However, so far the effectiveness of the new computer system is not clear and concerns about privacy hinder the full implementation of the system.

Another difficulty informants mentioned is that, despite intensive cooperation, different organisations and institutions continue to work in their own interest; first and foremost they are part of the organisation they work for, and cooperation takes second place. Therefore, despite the aim of interagency cooperation there is still a lot of discretionary space left for individual organisations to operate in their own interest, as the coordinator of the youth office explains:

'What is complicated to such a one-stop office, it is of course a multi-disciplinary office in which enthusiastic employees of the various organisations are working but they remain part of their own mother organisation. So the project manager of the office is just a functional executive so to say. All interests of the parties involved remain of importance. That makes it very complicated.'

(Coordinator P7 Youth Office)

The interviewees also informed us that cooperation between social and commercial actors can be difficult. Because of marketisation, the youth office is compelled to refer youngsters to commercial partners because the municipality has contractual agreements with reintegration services. Social partners and commercial partners sometimes conflict because the commercial partners also have a commercial interest in activating dropouts. Commercial parties, in turn, sometimes feel excluded by the social partners who feel more affiliation with each other.

Another example of organisations having different interests is that social affairs of the municipality attempts to place people in sustainable labour market positions, while the public employment service (CWI) sometimes tends to ‘push’ people into short term positions simply to meet placement targets as formulated by the coordinator of the employer’s office:

‘And well, the public employment service (CWI) is solely targeted at placements and do not care if they are still there the next day, so to speak, while for the municipality that is a primary goal, we want to establish sustainable placements as we call it within the municipality.’

(Coordinator P5 Employers Office)

The coordinator of the youth office is afraid that cooperation between social affairs and the employment service will be disadvantageous for people receiving social assistance:

‘The municipality is responsible for people in social assistance and in general these people are qualitatively speaking less good than people on unemployment benefit, so the municipality is afraid that taking these groups together will be disadvantageous for the outflow of people on social assistance.’

(Coordinator P7 Youth Office)

The ‘lost’ group – the youngsters who are not reached

Some of the policies on early school leaving or youth unemployment will not reach all youngsters. For example, when youngsters become 18 and beyond the scope of compulsory education, it is difficult for schools and the municipality to intervene in someone’s personal situation. The municipality states that it tries to have in view all youngsters in the 18-year-old and younger age group:

‘We do say that we have all the youngsters in view. And officially that is true and that is what we try in reality too. We really do visit them at home if we cannot reach them.’

(Policymaker 2 P6 Municipality Department of Education)

However, when dropouts older than 18 are not in trouble with the law or the police and if they do not apply for social benefit, they are invisible. The work-study obligation is supposed to take care of this group. However, a complaint from the informants from the municipality is that they wish to see the work-study obligation as an obligation for the youngsters too, and not only as an obligation for the municipality to provide education or work opportunities.

In addition to the group of invisible youngsters there is also a group of ‘difficult’ youngsters. This group embarks on the programmes, but they are often rejected and passed on or not really taken care of. In fact, according to our informants, there are no suitable programmes for the most difficult group of youngsters.

Our interviewees define the most difficult group as a group of youngsters who are not motivated to finish the programme successfully or who have (psychological) problems that are too complex to deal with. An unmotivated group is, in fact, a lost group because the youngsters themselves no longer put in an appearance. There is, in this case, nothing that the professionals can do to make

the youngsters stay in the programme - participation is voluntary and motivation is crucial as reflected in the following statements from the coordinators of a rehabilitation project:

'It happens that someone does not show up for the intake and eventually you have to stop quite soon. You just cannot reach all of them. We also have a group we can not reach'

(Coordinator 2 P3 Rehabilitation Project)

'We do not try to get this group, it will become too complicated.' (On youngsters with psychiatric problems).

(Coordinator 1 P3 Rehabilitation Project)

Programmes generally have certain intake procedures to ascertain whether dropouts have the necessary requirements and motivation to conclude the activation programme successfully. 'Difficult' groups are then rejected. The organisations and their professionals use discretionary power and apply coping behaviours in order not to get involved with the most difficult youngsters. It is therefore very easy for organisations to apply their own admission requirements.

One explanation for these practices may possibly lie in the marketisation of the reintegration services. Commercial reintegration services only accept 'workable' customers, who, they are sure, will be reintegrated into school or work within a certain timeframe. Most programmes have a fixed schedule and have to meet the targets set by the municipality in order to receive financial support. This might indicate a strategy of creaming in which only workable clients are admitted (Struyven & Steurs, 2002; Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2005; Winter, 2003). As stated above, creaming strategies are coping behaviours of professionals to handle work and time pressure in order to meet their targets.

'One group is left over, and we take care of part of that group. And still, there are many who first need something else before they can start here or who are not suitable for our programme at all.'

(Coordinator 1 P3 Rehabilitation Project)

We noticed that reintegration programmes focus increasingly more on mental care. Mental care provision generally takes longer than activation programmes and reintegration to the labour market is not the main goal. We recognised this process as a possible parking strategy in which difficult clients are 'parked' in long-term psychological programmes (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2005). 'Parking' is another example of coping behaviour, in which difficult clients are not really taken care of because the risk of them failing the programme is high, while at the same time they can officially report to the municipality that the youngsters have, in fact, been admitted and receive payment. The following example shows how clients who according to the social affairs intake are considered to be 'easier to activate' (belonging in category 1-2 programmes) are sent to a private activation company to be activated and then are being re-categorised:

'We noticed that social affairs presented many clients for programmes 1 and 2 whereas their problematic situation was one in fact that belongs to programme 5 –the psychological programme– where you have more time to get to the essence of the matter.'

(Coordinator P10 Reintegration Service)

A work coach of the Youth office complains about this practice of the private activation company:

'They made a lot of phone calls to transfer youngsters to a care programme. A care programme lasts a year so they have more time to place youngsters and also receive more money. My idea is that they try to categorise many youngsters as having psychological problems and yes, money seems to be a clear target.'

(Work coach P7 Youth Office)

Basic qualification requirement

One interesting point relating to the demand for sufficient qualification arises from the interviews with professionals from schools and reintegration companies. In line with national activation policy, returning to education often takes precedence over work as far as possible (Min. SZW, 2007b).

However, the opposite picture emerged during the interviews. On the one hand the need for sufficient education and the emphasis on the basic qualification is often stated to be an important official goal of the programme. On the other hand, for several reasons many professionals in the field reject the need for these youngsters to obtain the basic qualification. First, they feel this standard is too high for some groups and too much is asked of these youngsters.

'Is the norm of the basic qualification perhaps too high?'

'Yes, in some cases the level of the basic qualification does appear to be too high. And these youngsters are always perceived as dropouts and we feel this is not fair. Students who do not have the ability, who can just attend level 1, they have to, that's it.'

(Policymaker P12 Regional Training Centre 2)

Secondly, the officials consider that making older youngsters in particular (over 23, the age above which they are no longer officially deemed to be a dropout) attend school is unrealistic. They are too old and will certainly not be motivated to attend school together with 16 and 17 year olds. Instead, many youngsters are actually better off when they have a good place to work. Furthermore, the basic qualification level is not necessarily required in order to find and keep a job. Interviewees state that many lower-educated people are successful on the labour market. Therefore, many professionals in the field do not agree with the official goals to improve qualifications and they focus instead on the transition to work.

'What we see in Utrecht, and what I'm convinced of is that everybody who wants to work can work, regardless of their qualification.'

(Coordinator P5 Employers Office)

Professionals use their discretionary power and often support youngsters to find a job instead of helping them get back to school if they think someone would be better off on the labour market. By doing so, they give their own twist to official activation policies which prioritise education. The following quote from an educational policymaker summarizes some of the basic qualification issues:

'Early school leaving involves youngsters without a basic qualification who drop out. So all the youngsters who reach level 1 and for whom we do our utmost to get them to develop, well, this is something that is not rewarded. They leave school with a level 1 certificate and go straight to the labour market where they perform fine but they do not have a basic qualification and are still perceived as being a dropout - this is actually a bit strange.'

(Policymaker P9 Regional Training Centre 1)

This demand for the basic qualification level also has repercussions on the young people. Youngsters are clearly aware of the qualification norm that is imposed on them and adjust their future expectations in line with this norm. Many professionals report that these youngsters have a too high expectation of their future career and many dropouts participating in activation programmes find it difficult to accept their 'too low' qualification. This hampers their reintegration process for the simple reason that youngsters are not willing to accept a lower level education or job, and this process of acceptance often takes a long time.

'Many of them can't reach the level of the basic qualification, level 1 is the highest achievable for them. The problem is that we all say: you need the basic qualification (level 2) and youngsters believe they have to achieve this as well. Even when you tell them it is too difficult for them to achieve, they still want to. That's the norm we set as society.'

(Coordinator P7 Youth Office)

The supposed lack of employability

An important element in the activation programmes focuses on the transition to work. In these programmes, professionals instil in the young people that it is their personal responsibility to make themselves suitable to enter the labour market; they must improve their employability. This relates to the characteristics of activation policies and ALMPs, where welfare entitlements, such as to social benefit, are made more conditional on individual action and effort (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2005; Eichhorst et al., 2008). Many professionals in the field indicate problems with attitude towards working and in particular with 'employee skills', which are seen to be needed in order to be 'employable'.

'Learning soft skills is a point of interest; I mean we are not trying to objectify whether a person meets the norms of employee skills, but in the work first projects that is mostly the point of interest. We continuously point out: do you know what is usual behaviour in the workspace? That means being on time, to cancel by telephone if you are ill. Things that are normal for most people, but not in the starting phase of a paid job for this group.'

(Coordinator P4 Employment Desk)

It is assumed that many young dropouts, and migrants in particular, do not have these skills. Therefore, the primary task of the reintegration programmes is to help dropouts get used to a daily work routine, and to practice skills to enable them to perform as expected at work. A coordinator of one of the projects in Utrecht makes clear why it is important to focus on learning employee or social skills to young migrant dropouts:

'They are being prepared here for the labour market, so how exactly does that work and what is important?'

'All the skills needed to be able to perform as required. So, being on time, keeping appointments, decent communication, no shouting, no getting angry and throwing things around and then walking away. But it won't always work, but you have to try because they just don't know.'

'Is that really a deficiency or a problem of this group?'

'Yes, yes, with migrant youth it's just that they're not used to it, they're just not used to it. It's also ignorance. It's not that they are unwilling, it's often sheer ignorance.'

(Coordinator P10 Reintegration Service)

The interviewees also indicated that the particular problems with migrants' employee skills can also be explained by their having street culture combined with insufficient (parental) guidance or structure at home and school. This makes it difficult for them to conform to the prescribed nine to five pattern of work and to keep appointments.

'Most of these youngsters grew up in a street culture. In street culture it is the survival of the fittest, so it matters how you present yourself to your friends. That brings a lot of problems, because they learned to think and behave in a particular way, which is difficult to change.'

(Coordinator P10 Reintegration Service)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the execution of policies to reduce school dropout levels and to activate young migrants to work in the local context of the city of Utrecht. In this conclusion we answer our research questions: how are policies concerning early school leaving and youth unemployment executed in the local context (the city of Utrecht) and what are the consequences for the migrant youngsters involved? Below we will summarize and discuss the tensions and difficulties that became apparent during the analysis. These are in line with the existing literature and relate to the following issues: successful implementation requires new cooperation structures and working methods. Moreover, high demands -in the sense of qualification and professional skills- resulting from the activation policies are placed on the youngsters.

Social policies on dropouts are implemented along the national policy lines of the forthcoming work-study obligation and the basic qualification requirement. The policies that oblige youngsters to study or to work have to be achieved through a comprehensive approach strategy involving different parties cooperating in a joint structure. A recent example of this strategy is the founding of the Utrecht youth office. All informants are convinced of the necessity and added value of this interagency cooperation and they are all keen to see it established. However, the informants also made it clear that cooperation is difficult - the more parties have to work together, the more complex the cooperation. Different organisations or institutions remain responsible for their own target groups and have their own objectives and targets to meet, and therefore continue to work from their own perspectives and agendas as also shown in other studies (see for instance Glendinning, 2003). This points to discretion, because the organisations' targets often conflict with the aims of cooperation, and street level bureaucrats ultimately decide how far cooperation goes.

Another focus of the comprehensive approach was a more customer-oriented style, in particular in the privatized reintegration market. Despite the aims for a more individualised approach, reintegration services continue to offer standard reintegration programmes, which, as other scholars (Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2005; Lindsay & McQuaid, 2008) have pointed out, is more (cost) effective for them. The problem with this is that it results in 'creaming' practices i.e. only admitting 'workable' clients. Some cases also showed instances of 'parking' strategies, where 'difficult' groups are 'parked' in long-term projects that mainly focus on psychological support. Applying street-level bureaucracy theory, creaming and parking strategies can also be seen as coping behaviours that professionals deploy in order to handle time constraints and to meet imposed targets. In general, we observed a more psychological approach to at-risk youngsters or dropouts, both in policies, as in schools and also in the various programmes.

Moreover, all the professionals from the various organisations indicate that there is a 'lost' group. It is generally accepted that this group cannot be helped. Organisations are free to reject certain clients, and sometimes youngsters are passed on to other organisations or are beyond reach which again indicates 'creaming practices'. The respondents claim some problems are too complex to deal with or that some youngsters are simply not motivated enough to participate in the programmes successfully. Other studies show that negative perceptions of the motives of the target group can enforce coping practices such as creaming (Winter, 2002). The discretionary power of professionals is important in these situations because professionals can decide whether a young person is admitted to the programme or not. There is also some doubt as to whether the customer-oriented approach is suitable for this group: their expectations of education and a future professional career are often seen by the professionals as unrealistic and impossible to fulfil.

In general, the activation policies give precedence to study rather than employment. However, we found that professionals acknowledge that obtaining a basic qualification is simply not realistic for some youngsters who would be better off on the labour market. This imposed qualification norm stigmatizes dropouts who are, in fact, successfully employed and it makes it more difficult for young people participating in the programmes to accept their lower educational level. The central

premise of the street-level bureaucracy theory, which says that professionals ultimately decide how official policies are implemented, becomes clear in this case; despite the official educational policy goals, many professionals focus more on labour market participation. Discretion makes it possible for professionals to act independently when making their own decisions about the best programme for a youngster.

Finally, we would like to indicate how young migrant dropouts are perceived by the professionals- they are not employable and lack the appropriate employee skills. However, they do feel that obtaining these skills is an important aim of preventive and reintegration projects. Respondents believe the lack of competences has to do with street culture and not having the right structure and guidance at home and school. However, by focusing on their lack of social competences the professionals can unintentionally contribute towards stigmatizing them as unmotivated and unwilling. Well-intended interventions that try to improve the social skills can in this way also lead to further stigmatization and even exclusion of young migrant dropouts in particular. A number of studies confirm this statement and show that the presumed lack of social skills is used by some employers as an excuse for not hiring young migrants. This is defined as a subtle form of discrimination (Moss & Tilly, 1995, 2001; Schaafsma, 2006).

Conclusion

All the current activation policies and measures can be seen in the light of the general trend in European welfare states to make a transition to a knowledge/service-based economy. This kind of economy requires young people to be educated as much as possible to ensure successful labour market participation. However, the danger is that vulnerable groups, such as migrant youngsters, will have problems meeting the new requirements and will end up as 'losers' in the knowledge economy (Esping-Andersen, 2000; Giddens, 2007; Bude, 2009). Indeed, what the professionals in our study say confirms the fact that some young migrants in the Netherlands have problems meeting the requirements of today's society in terms of professional and social skills. Moreover, our evaluation of activation policies in the local context showed that measures which aim to improve these skills can hinder instead of support these youngsters.

From all the projects we included in our study, we spoke to one or two key figures. We expected them to be the right source of information about the implemented social policies in the local context. A next step in our research would be to include perspectives of more persons involved in the programmes, and especially executive staff, which could contribute to a better understanding of the complexities and working methods of the individual programmes. Although we have conducted research with a few youngsters for this study, we believe in future studies more attention should be paid to the perspectives of the young dropouts themselves. The ideas of the youngsters about the basic qualification and supposed lack of soft skills are of importance to get a better understanding of the consequences of these requirements for the youngsters.

This study analysed the activation of young migrant dropouts in a major Dutch city and described the possible tensions, problems and contradictions in the field. This revealed that well-intended policies and reintegration initiatives can contribute to the marginalisation of some young dropouts. Attention should be given to these issues. Although reintegration policies and programmes can be beneficial for a large number of dropouts, we have to bear in mind that some youngsters will be hampered rather than supported and end up in an even worse position.

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Appendix

Table 1: Organisations and informants

Organisation:	Public or private?	Informant:
1. Study-Work Office	Public	Coordinator
2. Garage	Private	Owner, Advisor, Teacher/foreman 1, Teacher/foreman 2
3. Rehabilitation Project	Private	Coordinator 1, Coordinator 2
4. Employment Desk	Public	Coordinator
5. Employers Office	Public	Coordinator
6. Municipality: Department of Education	Public	Policymaker 1, Policymaker 2
7. Youth Office	Public	Coordinator, Work Coach
8. Rebound Facility	Public	Coordinator
9. Regional Training Centre 1	Public	Policymaker, Coordinator Internships, Career Counsellor, Coordinator Basic Vocational training (level 2), Intercultural Coach
10. Reintegration Service	Private	Coordinator
11. Buddy Project	Public	Coordinator
12. Regional Training Centre 2	Public	Policymaker Coordinator
13. Self-Employment Project	Private	Coordinator
14. School Attendance Office	Public	School attendance officer 1, School attendance officer 2
15. Empowerment Initiative	Private	Coordinator
16. Migrant Network	Private	Coordinator